

DEREK HAYES

Melanie

ON A COOL SPRING DAY, a videocassette tucked under her arm, Melanie entered The Lucky Dragon. She ordered two portions of dumplings and pork fried rice and then sat down at an empty table in order to get off her feet while she waited. The restaurant had been empty until a group of people entered and sat at one of the round tables. A waiter, newly hired, came out with dumplings and rice on a tray. Melanie jumped up and said, "No! I'm not eating here. I always eat takeout." She smiled at the other customers and said, "My friend is waiting for me outside. I'm sorry. This is all my fault but I need the food wrapped for take-out."

The waiter took the food behind the counter and prepared it for take-out. As he was handing it over, Melanie, hand to head, first flattened a stray mousy clump of hair sprung awry, next shielded three tiny craters to the right of her thin lips, evidence of acne harvested too early. She said, "My friend really likes extra peanut sauce if you don't mind."

When she was outside, she stood on the sidewalk and peered through the window, staring at the waiter. Loose change in his pockets pulled his belt down so that Melanie could see the shape of his hipbone through his Jockey underwear. He deftly balanced a tray of squid and broccoli with one hand and with the other he carried a pitcher of water, concentrating so hard that his reddish-brown moustache appeared to twitch. Melanie thought that it was nicest thing in the world for them to have hired a Caucasian man to serve her. She didn't speak Mandarin after all, and although when ordering she could indicate her dish of choice by writing down the corresponding item number on a pad, she felt more comfortable now that she could communicate with this man—he'd probably be close to her age, right? *What can I say to him?* thought Melanie.

Off the streetcar, she dropped the video clumsily, then picked it up from beneath the exhaust pipe of a red Pontiac 1999, coincidentally in *her* designated spot. Oh dear, thought Melanie, *I've got to speak to them about*

this. This is going to be a problem. They can't park here, completely unacceptable!

Melanie bumped into her neighbours in the hallway. The man juggled car keys in his right hand, *most likely matched to the red Pontiac outside*, thought Melanie, and hauled a bag full of groceries into apartment B. The woman asked, "What movie are you going to watch Melanie?"

Melanie said, "*Romancing the Stone.*" Melanie stared at the man. *Is that your Pontiac? Melanie thought. Can't keep it there. Is this going to be a problem?*

"We're having friends over," the woman said, "After you are finished eating and watching your movie, would you like to come over for a drink?"

Melanie said, "I can't. I'm not even watching this. I'm going out with my sister. We're going dancing." She then scurried into her apartment and shut the door.

Melanie turned out all the lights in her apartment, took off most of her clothing and crawled around her apartment on all fours to ensure that she didn't make any noise. She lowered the volume of the movie so that it was barely audible, and sat on her knees a few inches in front of the television. One of her hands moved from the potato-chip bag to her mouth. Her hands rubbed grease into the folds of her flabby belly and legs. She was then in her parent's home in Maplehorn, moving to another hiding position, chin on the ground adjacent to the baseboard and the accumulated grime, suppressing a sneeze so as not to give her sister a clue as to where she was, then moving to the next hideout, her sister unfairly discontinuing the count at seventeen when she was supposed to count to twenty-five. Now she was crying. Thoughts of her sister, her kind disposition—the only person in the world who loved her—made her cry, but then she stopped, thinking that the waiter, the lovely, red-moustached man, could see her like this and that she felt vulnerable and homely. She didn't like this feeling, but then on second thought, it was nice to think about her sister and so she continued to quietly sob—God it felt good!—and waiter be screwed if he were to judge her for this. Pony-tailed man also be screwed, how dare he park in her spot! Probably told his girlfriend she wouldn't mind. Well, of course she cared. Can't get carried away, though, they might hear her, and, Oh God, that would be awful! She carried a flashlight so that she could find the refrigerator and so that she could read her R.T. Williams mystery books in the dark. She lay naked on her carpet, reading and intermittently using the binding of her book to scratch the large folds of her mid-section.

Towards midnight, just as the party next door was winding down, Melanie allowed herself one noisy indulgence: she sat in her shower with

the hot water streaming on her head. She held her R.T. Williams mystery novel away from the splashes of water and read until the hot water ran out. She lay in a way that she believed made her more attractive—her bottom on the floor, flattened and no longer sagging, her belly, concave at the rib cage, her hair and face wet. She wished that the lovely waiter could see her in this way, and for a moment she was optimistic that it was truly possible that one day he would see her in this flattering position. Why not? Becky Charles had a husband. *What can I say to him?* thought Melanie. *It's got to be something that is casual, yet intimate enough for him to notice me—I know,* she thought—*I can ask him how long he's worked there.* Melanie, tucked in, phone cradled by her neck, “He’s the nicest man. You should see him, Nicole.” “Oh, I could never do that.” “What? All alone. No, I never eat alone.” “No, it’s simply a bad idea. You’ve got to come down so that we can go there *together.*”



Melanie jumped when Becky Charles walked into the boardroom with an urn of coffee on a cart. Melanie was spreading out her lunch as if she were on a picnic, had laid out containers on the ground: a tub of cottage cheese; four slices of pizza; two cartons of milk and a muffin. Anyone passing by the room would not have been able to see her through the tiny window at the top of the door. Becky now in the room, Melanie felt like a trapped squirrel—she huddled in the corner of the room on the ground. Despite assurances from Becky that she didn’t have to hurry, Melanie gathered the cottage cheese and pizza. Pieces of cheese and sauce sprayed the lining of her purse. She had a fleeting, distorted thought that Becky might confiscate her lunch. On the way out she said that her friends from accounting usually ate with her, though Melanie didn’t know why she had lied to Becky—Becky, the one nice salesperson in the company, Becky, the sweet middle-aged lady, who always offered her rides home, and who always wished her a nice weekend. Melanie ran after Becky, poked her on the shoulder and, hushed voice, said, “Actually, I’ve been eating alone in this room every day, Becky. Little ashamed of this, though. Can we just keep this between the two of us?”



Melanie lingered in the hallway of the apartment building, hoped that she might get to introduce Nicole to the neighbours, not to the man

with the ponytail, but to his girlfriend, the girl who had invited her to the party. *They don't even think I have a sister*, Melanie thought. *They can see with their own eyes not only that I have a sister, but also that we have the same bouncy, red curls and unaffected smile and grace, a gift from Daddy, and that she is about the best sister anyone in this world could have and that the two of us together are a team.*



Melanie and Nicole sat down at one of the round tables at The Lucky Dragon and looked at the menus. Nicole had just gotten up and had walked to the washroom when the waiter came over to take their order. Melanie, with a tear in her eye, pointed to the washroom and in a mild frenzy said, "My sister was just here. She is in the washroom."

With her sister back from the toilet, the nice-looking waiter returned to take their order. Melanie, hand reflexively covering the pockmarks, introduced her sister to him and ordered a plate of Gong Bau chicken. When he walked away, Melanie thought, *Oh dear, what was it that I was going to say to him? Something about how long he had worked here? How did that go? You look busy.*

Melanie had difficulty responding to her sister's inquiries about her job during dinner because she was trying to think about what she might say to the waiter when he returned.

"Why don't you ever eat here alone, Mel?" said Nicole.

Oh I could never do that! I mean—where would I sit?"

Nicole pointed to an older woman who was sitting in a corner of the room eating by herself. At first glance, Melanie had felt that she was a businesswoman because she was wearing a suit, but on second thought she wasn't sure. The lady was reading a magazine, an *In Style* magazine that was more suitable perhaps for someone creatively inclined. The lady, thought Melanie, is the oddest of things. She is alone, spread out like she were sitting in her own sunroom, has a fuchsia blouse and suit jacket, grey hair perfectly pinned, eyelashes done but not sloppy and yet here she is blowing her nose in public, not discarding the tissue in her purse but placing the bacteria-infected rag next to her plate of fried noodles—and she is doing this entirely unselfconsciously. I can *be* this woman, thought Melanie. She asked her sister, "Do you think she looks distinguished? Do you think she is married?"

Her sister answered these questions patiently and then said, "Why don't you invite her to sit with us?"

Melanie said, "Oh God! If you do that I'll die right here on the spot."



Melanie was then sitting at her desk working, organizing a meeting with CIB, in fact, but also, listening to Becky Charles, large front teeth with a drizzle of saliva, who was recounting her weekend with two investment counsellors. Becky said, "I've been so tired. You know, the long hours here and then my children, bless them, are at the age now where they are just growing into their bodies, hormones raging. Every free second I have is taken up by looking after their every need. I needed some time to myself, right? You're going to think I am totally spoiled but I booked at Sunnybrook, a resort near the Athagasa hills. Joe took the children for the weekend and so there was no one to burden me when I ate, could get sloshed on the cheap red wine, could go for long walks in the garden. I met this woman, Linda, 'bout my age and we had a wonderful time, talking and walking together." She said, "I needed some time for myself. Some *me* time. I think sometimes that I'm my own best company. You know what I mean?" Melanie irked by the phone that was ringing in the next cubicle, thought, *I do know what you mean, Becky. You're talking about human dignity, right? We all have dignity—you are a very strong woman, Becky Charles, and don't worry I will never, ever steal your dignity from you. You look busy. You would have loved to meet this lady, oh, I never actually got her name, but she was in the Lucky Dragon with us the other time and she reminded me exactly of you, Becky. She was a powerful person, too. I wish I had gotten to know more about this woman, the woman with the In Style magazine, that is. And I wish that I could have told her what kind of impression she left on me. You look busy. We all after all have our dignity,* Melanie thought. *You were so nice to me when you caught me in the boardroom, eating where I wasn't allowed. You have a kind heart.*

Melanie, who rarely spoke to others at work, got up from her chair, approached Becky, who Melanie now thought looked unnecessarily surprised, eyebrows raised, thin lips formed into an O—a palpable shock running from woman to woman. Oh God, thought Melanie, this is embarrassing. She gathered a faint steam of courage, said, "Could you get me a brochure for that hotel?"



Melanie, a touch of rouge hiding the scars on her face, adorned with a recently purchased brown leather coat, walked on Spadina Street, first to Dundas and then, reversed, back to College, eyes fixed on the yellow neon sign, LUCKY DRAGON, and below, the equivalent in Chinese characters. *This is just like going to get my haircut—no reason for it to turn bad. Nicole is praying for me. She wants this oh so bad to turn out okay for me and so I have to do this for her, really. Oh, let's just do this. Waiter be screwed if he is going to judge me. I just want to eat, right? I make money like any normal person, just want to eat, need to eat or I will be hungry, right?*

The waiter assembled her dumplings and noodles and placed them in a bag. When he handed the bag to her, Melanie said, "I want to eat here tonight." *I must have sounded oh so nervous. Am I trembling?*

"That's okay." The waiter smiled. His reddish-brown moustache twitched.

She motioned to grab the bag so she could take it to her table but he told her that he would take it out to her and that she could eat with a knife and fork if she so desired. At the table Melanie used her R. T. Williams mystery novel as a shield. When the waiter approached her table in order to ask her what she wanted to drink, she did not lower it. She asked for a glass of water, her words muffled by the mystery novel, which remained just inches from her face. When the waiter brought her food to the table, she said, "Thanks." The waiter smiled and this calmed her. *Oh, what was it that I want to say to him? You look busy. Too late for that though, Melanie. You're going to have to wait till next time.*

Melanie slowly chewed her dumplings. From behind her novel she noticed a couple, eating in the corner of the restaurant. The man and the woman had at no point in time during their dinner, spoken to each other except to ask about pedantic matters such as the amount of the bill and directions to the washroom. Again she began to daydream about the woman with the *In Style* magazine and about Becky Charles, the imagined conversations, and the insightful remarks by her in her daydreams left her with a faint smile on her lips. Melanie's mood improved considerably. She came to an understanding—what she thought of as an epiphany—that nobody cared about her, that no one was watching her and that nobody noticed her. Sitting down in the restaurant had indeed been difficult, but once at her table, she felt comfortable that she didn't stand out at all, a sort of camouflage, *me in my natural environment, thought Melanie, me wiping some of the chilli sauce from the edge of the jar so it won't soil the marble table, stabbing each piece of Xui Jiao and plunking it in my mouth, swirling the chopsticks in the Gong Bao Ji, as natural as a female cat licks the dust and*

hairballs from her fur, right? And best of all is that the food tastes just as good as take-out. Now, all I've got to do is get the ball rolling—this man probably wants to talk to me just as much as I want to talk with him. Just get it over with, Mel. You look busy.



Melanie got up from her cubicle, approached Becky Charles and stood in front of her desk. She said, "I went to Lucky Dragon on Saturday night." Then she then hastily added, "My friend came with me." She turned around and walked back to her desk. Five minutes later Melanie returned to Becky's desk to tell her that what she had said earlier hadn't been true and that she had not eaten with a friend—that she had gone to The Lucky Dragon by herself. Melanie said, "I needed some time for myself. I'm feeling really good these days!" "That's great, Melanie," Becky said. Melanie walked away. She thought that Becky's reaction this time had been considerate—inherent in her look had been the requisite amount of respect appropriate to the situation combined with perfect timing—the decision to cut off the conversation at just the right time.



The waiter with the reddish-brown-coloured moustache approached her and asked for her order.

Melanie, *my sister is praying for me*, ordered and said, "You look busy today."

The waiter looked around at the half-empty restaurant and caustically said, "That's very observant of you."



Melanie rode three extra subway stops on the way home that night and had to double back east to get to her stop. In the elevator she got off at the wrong floor and decided to walk up four flights of stairs instead of waiting for the elevator again. The superintendent hasn't fixed the light in the elevator, thought Melanie, and of course someone tracked dirt in here and so why would I not be distracted—*Oh I wish I had said something clever to that waiter! Why does everyone hate me so?* Inside her apartment she couldn't remember eating her fried noodles and she agonized as to whether she had paid her bill or not. She called The Lucky Dragon and said, "Sorry,

I've had a long day at work. I was just at your restaurant and I'm not sure if I paid."

The waiter riffled through the receipts and found that she had paid and told her so.

Melanie said, "Good," and then hung up.

The distressed young lady set her alarm clock so that she could get up and get to work early the next morning. After the alarm sounded she remembered the events of the night before, stared at her walls for forty minutes and ended up getting to work five minutes late.

She came home later that day and discovered that somebody had parked in her designated parking space. The offending person was, of course, the boyfriend of her neighbour, the pony-tailed jerk that was over almost every night. She thought about putting red cones there but then she didn't want them to think she had thought too much about this. She thought about putting a note on the windshield of the car. She was confident that she could get the wording just right but then she dismissed this. After all, if she put the note on the windshield, it would be their prerogative to approach her or bring up the subject and she didn't think she could cope with this. She didn't want to—what was the saying?—lob the proverbial ball onto their court and give them the advantage? She thought about perhaps waiting for them in the dark, perhaps behind a pillar, so as to casually come across them one day so as to mention that she needed the spot. *They said, "We need it." She said, "You're being really unreasonable!" The man then, the one with the loping gait and the jet-black hair, tied back in a pony tail, said, "Fuck if we care!" I lie on the pebbly surface, under the light so as to be seen and like our Lord, Jesus Christ, I sacrifice my body—if they want the blood on their hands. They feel guilty and understand that it is after all my spot. It's been my spot for three years. I'd get more money if I didn't have a spot. Who takes another person's spot? I am putting some cones there—stop them from coming in. They move the cones. I set up twenty-five cones, cover every square millimetre of my space, space that I can do whatever I want with. I can let a homeless man camp out in my space. I decorate my space with flowers and put a patio set on it so I can read and have some lemonade now that it is getting warm and nobody stops me. They drive over the cones, I put them back. They drive over them again, they find a cone on top of their car like a dunce cap, saying, how dare you drive over me, this space belongs to Melanie! People take my side. Nobody talks to them. They have to leave the complex. We vote at the next meeting, all eight of us, and everyone votes for them to leave and for me to stay.*

Nicole, phoning from her office, said, "I think you should talk about it with them first, Mel, but if it will make you feel less anxious, then I guess maybe you should call a towing truck."

"They are parking in my spot and it is Wednesday. It is not even the weekend. I can't even leave to do the grocery shopping. I do the shopping every Wednesday evening."

"But why do you care so much, Melanie? You don't own a car. You can leave and do your shopping. They're not keeping you there. Will you please try to do something to calm your anger, Mel."

"You're right. I can't seem to get it out my head. I don't know what I can do though."

"Go and talk to them."



When Nicole arrived, Melanie was frustrated because her neighbour's boyfriend *hadn't* parked in her spot. Melanie thought, how could they have known Nicole was coming? Listening in on my calls? *They deliberately didn't park there to embarrass me in front of my sister, the one person who trusts me, trying to take away the one person who fully believes in me, and all that I am worth. They don't know the truth. Together we are formidable. Wait till they see the wrath of my big sis. It's coming. I've seen it before.*

After dinner, with Melanie, full-blown panic attack imminent, watching from her doorway, Nicole walked down the apartment hallway and knocked on the door. A young woman answered, her boyfriend behind her.

Nicole said, "Sorry to bother you. I'm Melanie's sister—the girl that lives down the hall—I was wondering if you could do us a favour. Could you please ask your guests not to park in her spot? I sometimes come down for the weekend and I need to park there and even though Melanie doesn't have a car she likes to keep it free during the week."

The man, the one with the ponytail, said, "We didn't realize that it was a problem. Of course we will tell our friends not to park there. I am very sorry if it has inconvenienced you or Melanie in the past."

By the time Nicole had pushed her into her apartment and had shut the door, Melanie was crying, inaudible sobs that were more grotesque than sad.

Nicole said, "You need to tell people how you feel. You need to tell them your feelings before you get so upset. Work on your communication skills, Mel, or you are going to go through a lot of unnecessary heartache."



The waiter approached her and Melanie noticed that he had a vaguely bloated stomach, not the loose flabby kind of stomach you find on middle-aged men, but the distended type seen on children that are malnourished in undeveloped areas of the world. She said, “Hi, do you remember me from a month ago? I said, ‘You look busy.’ And you said, ‘That’s very observant of you.’ Well I happen to think that, ‘That’s very observant of you’ is a clever line. And while it is quite clever I also think it is an inconsiderate remark.

“You are an intelligent, physically attractive person but you lack sensitivity. The appropriate response on your behalf would have been to smile, maybe say, ‘Enjoy your coffee,’ and then move on.

“Do you have any idea how easy—how unoriginal—it is to come up with a sarcastic comment like that? Do you know how easy it is to ridicule someone who, like me last month, was trying to initiate a conversation? A stranger asks me for the time and I could say, ‘Screw yourself! Don’t ask strangers questions,’ and this person would indeed feel bad about him or herself. You may be thinking that you had absolutely no responsibility to talk with me last month, and I would agree with you whole heartedly—but I also add that like this liberty, the freedom to ignore whoever you want, I am afforded a similar liberty, to come in here and tell you how I feel.

“You might be thinking that you should just walk away from me because I am crazy. To this I say ‘walk the fuck away!’ However, having said all of this I also want to say that for the last few months I have been staring at your lovely, thin hips and at your cute, tight bottom. And yes, if you had asked nicely, I would have slept with you. Instead you said, ‘That’s very observant,’ and I went home and stared at my walls and got into fights with my sister and showed up late for work—I was so angry at you—I want to ask you how you feel about all of this.”

The waiter said, “Well, we could still meet after work.”

“Really,” Melanie thought about what to say next. “I don’t know. Well, do you think we can be friends?”

“Of course, we already *are* friends, Melanie.”

The waiter walked away from her table. Melanie thought, *maybe I was a little too hard on him. How did he know my name? Should I apologize to him?*